# Chinese Street Music: Complicating Musical Community

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**Abstract:** Musical community is a notion commonly evoked in situations of intensive collective activity and fervent negotiation of identities. Passion Square shows, the daily singing of Chinese pop classics in parks and on street corners in the city of Wuhan, have an ambivalent relationship with these ideas. They inspire modest outward signs of engagement and are guided by apparently individualistic concerns; singers are primarily motivated by making a living through the relationships they build with patrons, and reflection on group belonging is of lesser concern. How do these orientations help complicate the foundations of typical musical community discourses? I address community as a quality rather than as an entity to which people belong, exploring its ebbs and flows as associations between people, other bodies and the wider street music environment intersect with its various theoretical implications. A de-idealised picture of musical community better acknowledges the complexities of everyday musical experiences.

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## 1 Introduction

In early 2020, the Chinese city of Wuhan was first to live through unprecedented developments soon to become common across the globe, as tight restrictions were placed on many aspects of life – particularly public-space life – in response to the spread of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19). It also became the first centre of another impending world-wide phenomenon, the flurry of expressions of togetherness and solidarity that circulated through traditional media and online in face of the virus. Musical encouragements for an embattled Wuhan to muster its resilience and “hang in there” (Wuhan

*jiayou*) were joined by a new impetus for affirmation of local identities. Nostalgic Wuhan-dialect evocations of ordinary city experiences were at the heart of songs such as 'Hanyangmen huayuan' (Hanyang Gate Garden) by local singer-songwriter Feng Xiang (Zhang 2020: 14-15). This folk-idiom composition (*minyao*) for guitar and voice, written a few years before but fully taking off during the crisis, holds up the small patch of green space at Hanyang Gate as symbolic of an old Wuhan encroached upon by wider modernity; it also makes reference to other places of local significance, especially Minzhu Lu, the road that links the garden with Hubu Xiang, now a partly tourist-orientated street food lane a few minutes' walk away. The evocation of an exclusive local belonging could hardly be more direct:

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|---|---|
| 现在的民主路每天都人挨人 | These days, there are always people everywhere at Minzhu Lu |
| 外地人去了户部巷就来到汉阳门 | Outsiders come to Hanyang Gate once they've been to Hubu Xiang |
| 车子多 人也多 | All those cars, all those people |
| 满街放的流行歌 | With pop songs filling the streets |
| 只有汉阳门的花园 | It's only the garden at Hanyang Gate |
| 还属于我们这些人 | That still belongs to us |

('Hanyangmen huayuan' by Feng Xiang)

If the constants of local life can become so prominent in the music capturing imaginations under exceptional historical circumstances, what of more common periods themselves? In 2014, I spent time in Wuhan investigating precisely the 'pop songs filling the streets' that in Feng Xiang's song align squarely with the encroaching world of 'outsiders' (*waidi ren*) and represent the antithesis of belonging. Untouched by the heightening effects of crisis to come, naturally the mood for collectivity I found expressed in this aspect of the city's musical life was less palpable, and more ambiguous. My focus was 'Passion Square' (*jiqing guangchang*) – a recurring kind of street music show embedded in a wider ecosystem of other public-space popular music sounds and practices, including street-side karaoke, recorded music played out from the thresholds of businesses, and square dance exercise gatherings. Passion Square had spread even to Hanyang Gate Garden itself, along with a handful of other spots in the city, in performances held every afternoon and evening. Going beyond representations of Wuhan in musical texts, this research offers a sight of on-the-ground realities of collective musical experiences in the city, one that majors on more unassuming practices – in this case primarily dependent on face-to-face modes – that are ubiquitous in mundane urban life (García Quiñones, Kassabian and Boschi 2016).

My main conceptual point of reference is *community*, a notion widely and consistently employed to summarise how people associate around musical practices and products.[1] It is a term of collective life considered unique in "never being used unfavourably" (Williams, in Day 2006: 14), and the idealisation of 'communal' forms of living has been called an era-defining "leit-motif" of contemporary thinking (Gusfield 1975: 87). Discourses of community around Chinese-language popular culture – those noted and reinforced in scholarship – clearly resonate with singer Feng Xiang's nostalgic sentiments; Marc Moskowitz, for instance, finds "urbanisation and the break-down of community" to have left many "feeling isolated, lonely, and unsatisfied" – a central function of Chinese pop is apparently to provide outlet for these negative feelings (Moskowitz 2010: 53). So, is community a useful term of reference for Passion Square? If so, in which aspects of the practices is it a meaningful construct, and where do its limits and boundaries lie? Characteristics of Passion Square that I outline below – to do with embeddedness in public-space life, immediate physical situations, musical materials, modes of performing and audiencing, and so on – make this a fitting case for looking beyond the "ideal types of musical communities" represented by common discourse and theory in music studies and elsewhere (Torp 2017: 235). Central to my aim is recognising and countering the risks of overstating and idealising around musical community, complicating the notion in light of less neat realities found in mundane experiences.

This task rests on growing attention paid to "the active participatory role of social agents in the sensory production of sociality" (Harris 2020: 27). In this case study, emerging most pertinently from a focus on the sensory is what Adam Krims calls the "geographical fact" of music-related activity and the meanings made through it (Krims 2007: xv). Krims describes, for instance, how the physical separation of a CD retailer's classical section from its other departments through features of the shop's design is a material manifestation of that genre's rarefied status. Accessing this level of meaning involves approaching both humans and non-human things as potential "source of action" as they interrelate (Bates 2012: 372), a way of fleshing out precisely what lies behind the abstraction 'the social' – associations between elements, be they human or not (Latour 1996: 369). A major theme, then, is the geographical facts of Passion Square – in a broad sense: how collectivity plays out on an immediate level in material circumstances, shaped by sonic interactions with wider city life, built on the cooperative construction and sharing of spaces. This focus is the key way in which I bring ideas of musical community into better dialogue with ambiguities of experience here.

A second way involves a subtle change of language. I turn away from the singular countable noun 'a community' or the plural 'communities'. These words are inextricable from the idea of entities or

[1] The concerns of this Element are distinct from those of 'Community Music', a field of participatory research and therapeutic intervention aimed at producing benefits for participants who are "socially or culturally disadvantaged" (O'Grady and McFerran 2007: 15).

collections of people to which individuals can belong, enduring bodies defined by the duality of insiders and outsiders. Instead, I use the uncountable noun 'community', evoking a descriptive quality of a situation or strip of activity. I argue that it is more useful, in line with the complexity of lived experience – and less coloured by what I critique below as a quickness in typical discourses to valorise community – to acknowledge that facets meaningfully talked about with the language of community can come in and out of focus, ebb and flow, as various elements intersect. Ultimately, this reflects an intention to eschew the pursuit of this quality as a vindication, and the corresponding implication that where it is diluted is a deficiency. Finding community is not a 'solution' in a search for meaning in musical experiences. But versions of the notion, I argue, can be a useful reference point when decoupled from idealising tendencies and when their foundations are scrutinised.

## 1.1 Passion Square

Filming from high up on the Great Yangtze River Bridge in Wuhan in 2014, I am looking down on Hanyang Gate Garden, the same small area of green space that would capture imaginations through Feng Xiang's song in virus-hit times six years later. This rather unkempt miniature park would be entirely unassuming were it not for its position beneath the historic bridge, set between the banks of China's great river and this city's most famous landmark, the Yellow Crane Tower (Huanghe Lou) (Figure 1).[2] On the patio directly below, a woman in her thirties with microphone in hand steps towards a few men of more advanced years, all of whom are perched on plastic stools among the loose semi-circle of people gathered around her. As she sings, she stoops to extend a hand to several of these spectators in turn. The first shows no obvious response, staring unmoved at the singer for a second or two before allowing her to grasp his fingers for a perfunctory handshake. She tries again with another man, and he instinctively withdraws his hand, first opting to placate her with a wave-cum-salute before he changes his mind and submits. One more is staring at the ground as she approaches and seems caught off guard as he returns her greeting. The woman resumes the centre of her patio 'stage' just as a shower of twenty or thirty small-denomination banknotes is tossed in her direction, a tip from another audience member designed to flutter to earth around her feet (see Video Example 1).[3]

It is impossible to tell from up here which classic or more recent Chinese-language pop hit she is singing – not because the music fails to reach, but because its details are obscured in a cacophony of five other similar performances going on in parallel in the park. Some have live backing bands of

[2] For a less nostalgic picture of Hanyang Gate Garden's relatively recent condition, see a news report by Hao, Wang and Yin (2005), which describes it as a "blot on the landscape" (*dasha fengjing*), being "occupied by mah-jong tables, small peddlers, unisex massage, and crowds of people going to the toilet wherever they please."

[3] Special thanks are due to Petr Nuska for his indispensable video editing work, skilfully helping to make the very best of the footage I shot in Wuhan.

keyboard, drums and saxophone or trumpet, while others play recorded accompaniment through smartphones connected to the PA. Down below, though, each of the six stages seems to carve out a functioning niche in this challenging sonic environment, and against the wider backdrop of the traffic and other sounds of city life all around them.

[Insert Figure 1 here]
**Figure 1.** A view of Hanyang Gate Garden from the Great Yangtze River Bridge, with one of its patios below and the Yellow Crane Tower in the distance (photo by the author, 15 May 2014).

The hesitancy – perhaps even resistance – with which these men respond to the singer's efforts at interaction is characteristic of these Passion Square shows. The 'passion' here is not necessarily of a romantic or sexual kind but instead holds connotations of fervour and excitement – ironic given the prevalence of moderate behaviour I witness. The 'square' refers to the feature of city design originally associated with the mass rallies of more highly politicised times in China's socialist history, but now it is a more fluid term (Kendall 2019: 119) and it seems to matter little that there is significant variety in the kinds of public space that actually host the activities. Plus, reference to squares links the shows to the much better-known phenomenon of *guangchang wu* (square dancing), in which older urban residents all over China exercise to dance beats (Seetoo and Zou 2016).

These singing sessions are held daily in a few clusters in central Wuhan, with crowds of dozens or sometimes over a hundred gathering in derelict sites, street-corner locations and green spaces like this one. Most in the audiences are middle-aged and older men; many come especially for these shows and stay for their two- or three-hour duration. Some individuals present singers, who are almost all younger women, with cash tips during the singing – the primary way to express appreciation and solidarity (Video Example 2). This practice is part of a gift economy in which cycles of reciprocity carve out ongoing relationships between singers and a minority in their audiences who become patrons. Values reach impressive heights, many songs attracting several individual tips in multiples of 100 *yuan* (around 16 US dollars at the time) and occasionally they go into the thousands (see Horlor 2019a) – these gifts afford Passion Square singers comfortable livings. But more generally, people watch in apparently impassive states and usually engage with each other and the musicians undemonstratively. During my initial visits, I am struck that no one around me taps a foot to the beat or is obviously stirred by the music, and barely any spectators exchange more than a few words with their fellows. What Georgina Born calls an "aggregation of experience" certainly occurs (Born 2013: 29); on the most basic level, audience members go to Passion Square prepared to be among people, aware that they all contribute. But first glance points to an ambivalence in the ways many embrace or submit to this aggregation – it is certainly something humbler than, for instance, the "deindividuation"

that may be felt by members of sporting crowds when they chant in a state of "reduced self-awareness and concern for social evaluation" (Herrera 2018: 488).

During visits to Hanyang Gate Garden in the early stages of the first of two research trips in 2014 totalling four months' duration, I sometimes come across a regular audience member, Mr Wang. In his forties and married, he splits his time between the family home back in his native Qingdao, 800 kilometres away on China's northern coast, and the base for his watch business here in this city of around 10 million people, the capital of Hubei province. When in Wuhan, Wang lives the life of a bachelor and we joke about the freedom of being far from his wife. The first time we meet, he leads me around several of the park stages, where he is clearly well-known; each one has up to fifteen singers who take it in turns with two or three songs on the microphone. Several approach us to offer cigarettes and bottles of iced tea and to exchange a few words. I have already heard Mr Wang talk about how his business has taken him to over forty countries, and today he looks to impress by mentioning that we have been chatting half in Chinese and half in English – in fact, his English barely covers a few words. We walk by close to the emcee of one of the groups; his job is to manage the rotation of singers and to orchestrate thanks to gift-givers, ideally chipping in with animated comments during the singing. Picking me out as an unusual presence at the shows, he greets me on microphone with a comical exclamation, acting as if lighting up with excitement at what my presence may imply: "*meiyuan*!" (US dollars).

The centrality of money for Passion Square singers is evident – despite some efforts to conceal it – as I subsequently get to know a few from each of about a dozen different shows. On stage, Yinzi and Longzi, identical twins in their early twenties, project a seamless persona that plays up a naïve innocence. They always dress in matching outfits and sing breezy tunes with a childlike quality – 'Yi ge mama de nüer' (A Mother's Daughter), or 'Nongjia de xiao nühai' (Little Peasant Girl) – conspicuous among the normal mix of ballads, rock anthems and up-tempo pop numbers. Unlike in many singers, who exude a genuine quality, I see a more ruthless approach beneath the twins' persona. Our conversations are dominated by descriptions of difficulties in their lives; they talk about the poverty of their family left behind in Jingzhou, another city in Hubei province a few hours away, and how shows often leave them in tears when their income does not match the generally enthusiastic reception for their singing. Indeed, the more vocal of the twins, Yinzi, avoids many of my questions about Passion Square with phrases like "you will have to slowly understand" – I start to see our conversations largely as bids for my pity. I eventually experiment with ways to make them open up, giving small cash tips a few times when they get together to perform a unison duet. While they ordinarily leave me largely alone as I watch the shows, as soon as I give tips, they switch to a proactive attitude, coming over to spend time chatting, and welcoming my questions. Perhaps my experience parallels those of typical audience members I see them fraternising with, men who may be

drip-fed attention in exchange for their gifts. The wariness of many to engage with singers could be for fear of becoming entwined in these reciprocal dynamics.

Yinzi and Longzi's Passion Square stage is not among those here beneath the Yangtze Bridge, however. It is a couple of kilometres away in a larger riverside park, beside where the Yangtze meets its longest tributary, the Han. Instead of organisers each day setting up from scratch the PA system, a mat or box to act as a temporary stage, lighting, audience seating and canopies, here Passion Square takes place on four semi-permanent stages, each consisting of an open-sided arena with roof, a raised stage with in-situ PA, lighting and projector screens (Figure 2). Shows are held in the evening rather than the afternoon, audiences and gifts are larger, and there is a more formal feel to the organisation. The stakes feel a lot higher here, so it is understandable that the twins take a serious attitude to what they do. The same feeling impinges on my experience as a spectator too; the presence of comfortable seats in prime position at the front, one of which I am ushered into whenever I visit – a privilege of the special guest or major gift-giver – marks these shows out from the apparently undifferentiated crowds in the more modest settings. I begin to feel the impact of shows' material circumstances in how I relate with other people present.

[Insert Figure 2 here]
**Figure 2.** Yinzi and Longzi's stage (photo by the author, 11 May 2014).

I get to know Passion Square singers by spending time with them away from shows. One day, I meet up with a relatively new acquaintance, A-jia, while she is in the chair at a hair salon. We then talk over lunch about her distant home province and the tough economic circumstances that pushed her to leave four or five years ago in search of a living made through singing. Like almost all the singers around Wuhan's events, her performing career is founded on an enthusiasm for music that originated in childhood, rather than on any formal training in music. Indeed, the humbleness of her education is apparent to me when she struggles to write in my notebook common Chinese characters found in the names of songs she sings – or perhaps this is more a symptom of a recent smart-phone dependent lifestyle. It was only a few months before that she chanced upon the opportunity to come to Wuhan, but she has doubts about continuing with this hard and unstable way of life, naturally desiring a return to her husband and three-year-old son. Indeed, within weeks she is called back home as her husband and mother-in-law – herself unwell – are struggling to cope after the child injures his hand in an accident. Next, we browse a local shopping arcade for outfits she will wear on stage, and A-jia talks me through the balance she tries to strike between dressing up (*daban*) and maintaining her preferred modesty. As we walk, I point her attention towards a political poster that, like hundreds put up all around Wuhan by authorities, displays the 'Core Values of Socialism' (*Shehuizhuyi hexin jiazhi guan*)

(Figure 3).[4] I wonder if she might feel inclined to talk about her performing in light of the wider discourses saturating public space in the city, but she responds blankly: "I hardly ever pay attention."

[Insert Figure 3 here]

**Figure 3.** A typical public-space hoarding displaying the twelve 'Core Values of Socialism' (photo by the author, 22 December 2014).

## 1.2 Musical Community

If, then, my preoccupations when considering Passion Square do not always align with the concerns of participants, does my interest in community translate at all more generally in this context? How does it fit with conceptualisations of the activity that prevail around Passion Square, especially considering how these understandings might intersect with wider patterns in Chinese language? Indeed, do broader theorisations of musical community adequately take on board the nuances of vernacular terms and conceptualisations, variable as they may be in their overlaps with the English 'community' and in their degrees of pertinence in their individual contexts? *She* (社) is a "hallowed concept in Chinese political thought," carrying connotations of grassroots communitarianism and community spirit across various ages in China's history (Rowe 1984: 249; 1989: 95). From this come various related words, not only *shehui* (society) – which in turn gives way to the *Shehuizhuyi* (Socialism) that is so prominent a term in Wuhan's public life – but also a cluster whose meanings intersect with 'community' in English, one close match being *shequn* (Harris 2020: 24). On microphone or in conversation, I find Passion Square participants to call on *she* mainly with reference to a further idea, *shequ*; although this word can refer to a *state* of community (Xu 2008: 34), people here use it specifically to stress to me that their activity does not belong to the contemporary institutional realm of the *shequ* (literally a residential community or neighbourhood) and instead that it is organised in a private (*si*) one.

These nuances are a reminder that community is fundamentally a notion of the way aggregation of experience is understood subjectively; it should not be mistaken for part of an empirical reality or assumed to exist independently of people who recognise it (Gusfield 1975: 25). In this sense, it would seem theoretically essential to take the lead from participants' representations of a practice's collective character or indeed, in the case of Passion Square, to heed the growing picture of their indifference to such discussions. But if the attitudes of the singer A-jia and others hint that these ideas are not among the main conceptual reference points or factors motivating activity here, should

[4] These values are: strength and prosperity (*fuqiang*), democracy (*minzhu*), civility (*wenming*), harmony (*hexie*), freedom (*ziyou*), equality (*pingdeng*), justice (*gongzheng*), rule of law (*fazhi*), patriotism (*aiguo*), dedication to work (*jingye*), integrity (*chengxin*), and friendship (*youyi*).

community immediately be consigned to a position of irrelevance? An argument against comes in how stubborn a notion 'community' is in contemporary ethnomusicology. As an idea implicated in various scholarly agendas within and related to the discipline, its theoretical foundations demand continuing attention, as do the different kinds of work done in its name, alongside consideration for how it might be taken forward.

In work with members of the Karen ethnic group in Thailand, Benjamin Fairfield encapsulates a typical – perhaps *normative* – discourse about music and community: funeral songs "played an integral role in building community through enjoyment, courtship, anticipation, and nostalgic reflection (Fairfield 2019: 481). Likewise, Jennifer Post assesses a performance of a narrative song in the Kazakh diaspora in Mongolia as "a collective expression of community solidarity focused on maintaining continuity with ancestral history, landscape, and the cultural expression that ties it together" (Post 2007: 61). If these examples hint at some of the common ideas with which community is linked in mainstream ethnomusicology, the notion most explicitly steers the field of applied ethnomusicology, being embedded in its very raison d'être: scholars here set out to make "a music-centered intervention in a particular community, whose purpose is to benefit that community" (Titon and Pettan 2015: 4). The notion does not only shape conceptualisations of the *who* of this work, but it is also part of the *what* that its benefits are comprised of – a participatory action research initiative, for instance, might be framed as providing "a platform for people to address issues of identity, meaning and community" (Impey 2002: 13). Similar language accompanies recent work interested in 'repatriating' collections of musical materials, framed in the positive as "taking recordings from the archive into the community" (Landau 2012: 264). And 'community' also resonates strongly in the realm of cultural institutions; most prominently, it is embedded in UNESCO's goals surrounding intangible cultural heritage (UNESCO 2018; see also Harris 2020: 49).

In the latter context especially, the notion has attracted some criticism for its part in enabling governmental actors to exploit the appeal of related ideas such as 'national community' while actually "limiting independent local practice and harnessing cultural traditions to propaganda initiatives" (Harris 2020: 49-51). Academic uses of the notion have also received direct – but still isolated – criticism for involvement in idealising representations of certain musical practices. A notable voice is Helen O'Shea, who exposes a dissonance between contemporary researchers' "up-to-date toolkits of self-reflexive methodologies and dialogic relationships with their collaborators" and the comfort they seem to find in building investigations from "an imaginative cultural narrative that seeks wholeness and community" (O'Shea 2007: 18). Indeed, it is tempting to impose such a narrative – one of 'grassroots authenticity' – on Passion Square as a way of finding legitimacy in the practices and, by extension, personal validation in studying them. It may be even more so for situations where the emotive experiences of marginalised or persecuted groups are involved.

But what theoretical foundations lie beneath the common ways ideas of musical community have been harnessed? Most theoretical work tends to focus on self-consciously intensive or extensive collective engagements on bodily and affective levels (Clayton, Dueck and Leante 2013: 10) and on the fervent negotiation of identities, often marginalised ones and in online or diaspora settings (McGuire 2018; Harris 2020). In a contribution that has become the first point of reference for many subsequent scholars, Kay Kaufman Shelemay points to three kinds of identity upon which these processes often focus: the first two are those of descent (related to religious, ethnic and social inheritances) and of dissent (involving shared opposition to a particular state of affairs) (Shelemay 2011: 367-73). A rich literature emerges, for instance, about Muslim populations finding solidarity in sound as religious identities interact with wider ideas of national citizenship in various territories (Lee 1999; Eisenberg 2013). Shelemay's third focus is identities based on affinity: shared allegiance to particular forms of cultural expression, such as musical genres (Shelemay 2011: 373-5). This idea joins several that highlight processes of belonging focused on musical forms, including 'interpretive community' (Lum 1996) and 'genre community' (Lena 2012).

Based on Benedict Anderson's famous notion of "imagined community" (Anderson 1991), these versions of musical community predominantly look at groups of people for whom the notion itself has currency, where there is some degree of self-conscious reflection on, or pursuit of, community ideals. But the work deals less well with situations arguably more typical of the bulk of musical experiences in human life, ones where collective engagement and commitment to group expression are ostensibly muted, where the practices set out to be mainstream, inclusive and acceptable to most rather than to recruit a strongly committed few. Passion Square is an ideal case study through which to build upon current approaches; mundane circumstances less accessible to notions of descent and dissent, and an apparently weaker sense of affinity shift focus from self-conscious ideologies of community towards collective engagement based on intersections among human and non-human elements.

## 1.3 Passion Square and Community

Passion Square's core repertory of music is the canon of Mandarin-dialect pop classics from the 1980s onwards, some of the music with the most universal familiarity possible in this context, considering the modern ease of access to stylistic diversity. The mainstream reach of the music may generally speak more loudly to some demographic groups than others, but its relevance is certainly not limited to any recognised marginal population, underground movement, subculture or counterpublic. Participants rarely express a strong commitment to the particular forms and activities on display, at least not on an active level; audience members I speak to at shows sometimes tell me they prefer other kinds of music, especially local opera genres. But they are clearly at least able to tolerate what is

played here and, as I explain later, it suits organisers' profit orientations to dissolve boundaries around the kinds of people who participate, rather than to highlight potentially divisive identity issues involving demographically or politically orientated kinship. Larger unifying themes and concerns such as national identity are among the many that are touched on in the music, the content thematically diverse rather than clearly targeted at one particular concern or group.

My usage of the phrase 'Passion Square' itself requires a caveat so as not to overstate how firmly any discrete identity for these practices is inscribed in language. While the phrase comes up in my one-to-one conversations with musicians and organisers, I rarely if ever hear it used on microphone at shows; instead, when performers address audiences publicly, they refer to the assemblages in general terms such as 'venue' (*changzi*), 'stand' (*tanzi*) or 'stage' (*wutai*), and they sometimes use the names of their individual stages.[5] It is well established that the formalisation of distinct identities, on levels of both individual psychology (Pelczynski 1984) and broader culture (Gusfield 1975: 36), is highly dependent on recognition from outsiders – how a group is defined linguistically can reflect characteristics and exceptionalities identified externally as well as internally. But I do not find 'Passion Square' to have any wider currency beyond the people most actively involved; those I ask to introduce me to the events during my early stages of fieldwork, including audience members and staff in nearby businesses, usually use more general descriptions for what takes place, simply calling them 'amateur' (*yeyu*) performances or 'singing and dancing' (although dancing is never more than a minor part).

Indeed, I find little evidence that 'Passion Square' points more broadly to an established entity of any kind; unconnected people I know from Wuhan and elsewhere in China have little sense of the events I describe to them, and even when I show video clips, they can only guess that the music must be part of wedding celebrations or similar one-offs (see Video Example 3 for a representative performance excerpt). Occasional mentions in local media only reinforce the idea that general public consciousness is unfamiliar with the practices; the gatherings are called 'grassroots stages' (*caogen wutai*) (China News Service 2014) and the performers 'grassroots artists' (*caogen yishujia*) (Yuan 2014), while equally general terms are used for the activity itself: *maiyi* or *maichang* (performing for a living, literally 'selling art' or 'selling singing') (Ju 2014).

In some senses, it may be intuitive to align Passion Square with typical discourses of community – particularly as they are apparently informal in their organisation and they bring people into mutual orientations with others from their immediate local area in sustained and repeated ways. But on the

[5] Stage names include Xingguang yanyi (Starlight Performing Arts), Jianghe da wutai (The Great Rivers Grand Stage), Wangjiang da wutai (River View Grand Stage), Lanxing da wutai (Blue Star Grand Stage), and Gaoyuan shidai da wutai (The Highland Era Grand Stage).

surface are also several factors complicating this inclination. It is because rather than in spite of its complexities and ambivalences that Passion Square's collective dimensions demand to be taken seriously. The broad 'geographical facts' of the practices provide the main lens for exploring how qualities of collective experience emerge in the interaction of bodies, the combination of sounds, and the construction of space.

## 1.4 Fieldwork

This Element emerges primarily from participant observation at over 50 Passion Square shows in the spring and autumn of 2014 – in a variety of different locations in Wuhan. While present at performances and other events, I straddled several roles. I participated in ways that were little different from other audience members, watching the performances from among the spectators. I interacted with fellow audience members and became one of the known individuals that singers at different events would look out for, chat to, and extend hospitality towards. While my questions and requests to performers like the twins Yinzi and Longzi sometimes made these exchanges quite different from those between other participants, I sensed that even for some performers who got to know me relatively well in my role as a researcher, I was still treated as a potential patron. Sometimes this was framed as singers bestowing the favour of teaching me the customs of this unfamiliar social world in the hope of receiving my tips as a reward; but in general, I gained a relatively representative experience of the kinds of discourses and modes of interaction that usually prevailed. I was wary of entering the gift-giving exchanges, attempting to balance active participation with distance from relationships too overtly mediated by money. I repaid the openness of other contacts in different ways; one backing musician, for instance, asked me to sing several times at another kind of performance to which he contributed, and despite me being a novice singer, involving a foreign visitor obviously reflected well on him. With others, I settled into the role of privileged outsider: I was taken into confidence about information from private lives not shared with peers, invited to sit 'backstage' at shows, and told specifically by several singers that they did not expect tips from me. I was invited to numerous meals and various other occasions spent with performers on a one-to-one basis and as part of groups involving audience members, and I had online text chats with singers and backing musicians.

But while this broader ethnography led me in particular to deeper understandings of the gift economy (Horlor 2019a), and the overlap of everyday and performance realms (Horlor 2019b), the complications of community I have already outlined make it appropriate to call less upon the representations of collective experience offered by Passion Square participants. Instead, my focus widens to the level of group behaviour, how people interact spatially, and the materiality of these experiences. I consider Passion Square as a part of a wider ecosystem of sound in the city, conducting

sound surveys of the public space of the central portion of Wuhan, covering – to the best of my knowledge – all of the Passion Square events active at the time. I recorded the precise locations of any musical activity that I encountered at different times of day in a 3km x 4.5km area of the city's centre, ultimately focusing on two main categories alongside Passion Square: recorded music from businesses and square dancing. These observations give way to various senses in which aggregated experience here points to complications in musical community.